

Workers Struggles: Europe, Middle East & Africa

20 January 2006

Europe

Ukraine: Ferroalloy workers oppose privatisation

On January 19, 400 workers employed at the Nikopol Ferroalloy Plant (NFP) demonstrated outside the Constitutional Court of Ukraine in Kiev against the privatization of the firm. During the protests, police sealed off the demonstration. The Ukraine Supreme Court is currently considering the legality of the privatization of the company. The consortium Prydnistrovye is seeking to privatize the company by taking ownership of 51 percent of the firm.

German doctors strike in pay and administration dispute

Doctors in the German provinces of Saxony and Baden-Württemberg took strike action on January 16 to demand a pay increase. Several hundred participated in the protests. The German Healthcare Workers trade union said that if the dispute were not resolved it would initiate further industrial action in the next few months.

England: Train guards continue industrial action

On January 1, train guards employed by Virgin Voyager trains took industrial action in a dispute over payments for working Sundays. The workers are members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT). The RMT said that the introduction of a 35-hour-week had led to staff losing money at Virgin CrossCountry.

The action is the third strike by the train guards and led to the disruption of some train journeys. The company said that during the strike it was still able to operate 123 trains—the same as during the strike by staff the previous week. The company drafted in managers to run services during the strike.

An RMT union spokesman in the Midlands, Ken Usher, said this week, “It’s not a dispute that we wished to enter into anyway. The company know exactly where we’re prepared to negotiate. It needs them to take our offer and get back round the table. We remain open and available for talks.”

Managing director Chris Gibb said that he was “prepared to let this [dispute] go on indefinitely.”

Virgin CrossCountry operates between Penzance and Aberdeen and includes scheduled services to cities such as Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Newcastle and Manchester.

Middle East

Bus drivers continue dispute in Iranian capital

Tehran’s bus drivers held a protest on January 7 by putting up posters of jailed union leader Mansoor Ossanlou on their screens and driving with their lights on all day. Some buses carried banners proclaiming, “An independent union must be formed.”

Workers from all the 10 transport districts of Tehran took part in the action. The bus drivers have gone without a wage increase for more than four years. Eyewitness reports said people waved at the buses,

chatted to the drivers and cheered them on. Drivers of private cars also joined in the action. One eyewitness said, “Tehran was with the workers and stood up to the regime.”

Scuffles broke out when the security forces and the bus company’s security (Herasat) tried to stop buses from moving and to take down the posters. In District 5 of the capital members of the government’s Special Detachment (Yegan e Vizhe) were deployed to intimidate the protesters.

Three drivers, Javad Kefayati, Seyyed Reza Nematipoor and Mohammad Namaanipoor, were arrested but later released. Hossein Shamsavari, from District 7, and another unnamed driver are still in detention.

Mansour Ossanlu, the head of the Union of Workers of the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company (Sherkat-e Vahed), has been detained since December 22, 2005 in Section 209 of Evin Prison in the capital, Tehran.

Ossanlu was among 12 officials from the union who were arrested by police at their homes on December 22, 2005. Four of the 12 were released shortly afterwards. During a union meeting on December 24, workers were attacked by plainclothes members of Ansar Hezbollah. Following the incident, the government ordered the arrest of 14 union leaders who still remain in custody.

On December 25, union members were arrested while staging a bus strike in Tehran, demanding the release of their colleagues. The following day all those detained were released, with the exception of Ossanlu and six other members of the Union’s Executive Board. These six were released two days later. Ossanlu has not been granted access to a lawyer and reports suggest that he may be facing charges, including contact with Iranian opposition groups abroad and instigating armed revolt against the authorities.

On December 31, reports indicated that seven union members, including Mansour Hayat Ghaybi (or Ghaybati), Ebrahim Madadi, Reza Tarazi, Gholamreza Mirza’I, Abbas Najand Kouhi and Ali Zad Hossein, had been summoned to appear before a Revolutionary Court in Tehran the following day on charges which included public order offences. However, following protests by union members outside the court on January 1, the seven were reportedly told that their trial had been postponed.

Workers have appealed to international labour and human rights organisations for urgent action in support of their demands and the immediate release of Ossanlu (who remains uncharged) and all other detained workers.

Israeli union body declares five separate disputes

The Histadrut Labour Federation declared five labour disputes on January 10, the first such action since Ofer Eini took over as chairman on January 1. The disputes cover the Dan bus cooperative, Haifa’s

government offices, the Ashkelon area fire services, the Ramat Gan municipality, and the Beit Levinstein hospital.

Histadrut also announced its support for work sanctions at the Israel Lands Administration that started in May 2005.

Following the declaration, workers will be allowed to strike or undertake work sanctions after a 14-day period. However, drivers at the Dan bus company started work stoppages without waiting the two-week “cooling-off” period. The drivers began a strike on January 9 on all of the company’s lines that connect Tel Aviv to Bat Yam, including around 250 bus routes, Army Radio reported.

They were demanding pay increases and improvements in work conditions, threatening further strikes if no solution is found. The company was going to hire pensioners to step in so that bus lines could continue running.

Meanwhile in an ongoing dispute at Israel Discount Bank, management has decided to stage a counter-strike and lock out staff from all of its branches across the country in response to the union’s decision to hold an “informational assembly” for 5,000 employees during the day. The workers’ committee decided to hold the meeting as part of its actions against management after the stalling of negotiations over a new work agreement.

The union is demanding bonuses, while management has offered workers over the age of 50 early retirement or voluntary severance packages. Management ordered employees not to report to work either at the bank’s branches or at headquarters, and announced they would not be paid for the day.

Migrant workers in UAE strike over back pay

Around 1,500 striking South Asian labourers marched through the streets of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, on January 14 demanding salaries that they say have gone unpaid for as long as four months.

Construction workers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal gathered outside the Sharjah Department of Labour and Social Affairs to demand back pay, improvements in living conditions and a rise in wages that currently run below \$1 per hour. The workers gathered in Al Musalla Park in Al Rolla and marched to the Sharjah Labour and Social Affairs Department to complain. Later they returned to the park and stayed there the whole day. The protest led to traffic jams.

The workers said they have no money, no food or drinking water, and no medical insurance coverage, and if they fell sick they were penalised with salary deductions of Dh100. “Eight representatives went yesterday to the labour ministry in Dubai to lodge a complaint, but it was rejected by the officials there. We typed all the documents to complain but were told that we have to submit a photocopy of our passports and labour cards. We do not have any of them. They told us at the ministry to pay Dh10 each so they can print it from the ministry’s computers, but we did not have money for that,” said one of the workers.

The labourers’ employer, the Perfect Group, has refused to raise salaries. Sharjah-based owner Kareem Abdullah said, “You can’t run the company how the workers want, you can only run the company how you want. We have no problem if people want to stop working. Give us your resignation and we will let you depart back to your countries. We will pay every penny that is owed.”

Around 1 million low-paid labourers from South Asia are being exploited to provide the building boom that has studded the Emirates with modern skyscrapers and shopping malls. In the emirate of Dubai, foreigners make up more than 80 percent of the city’s 1.5 million residents. Labourers brought in under strict contracts live in squalid desert camps and work in extreme heat, while wealthy expatriates

enjoy some of the world’s most luxurious accommodations. Abuse of workers—especially non-payment of wages—sparked dozens of strikes and street protests last year.

Abu Dhabi decor company workers continue strike

About 40 foreign workers of Saeed Saif Decor Company in Sonapur continued strike action after their employer failed to pay their salaries for the last 10 months. One worker involved in the dispute said, “We are in trouble. Most of us have not been paid for two to ten months. We used to borrow from the grocery nearby but since we did not pay the grocer, we have to stop borrowing. Now, we are eating only once a day,” adding that he had not gone home for the past seven years.

Another worker, added, “About 30 of us are here without labour cards. The company did not renew the labour cards, which expired two years back. We had lodged a complaint with Dubai Police Human Rights Department and they intervened in the matter.”

He said after the police intervention half of the salary was paid by the owner but he was threatening them, saying that he will send them back home.

Africa

Zambian copper miners take strike action

Copper miners at the Luanshya Mine in Zambia’s Copper Belt went on all-out strike on January 14. The mine is owned by Swiss-based J&W Investments and employs approximately 3,000 workers.

The company’s original offer was 5 percent, which was increased to 20 percent in an attempt to avert strike action.

A branch official of Zambia’s National Miners and Allied Workers Union (NMAWU) told *Dow Jones Newswires* that the strikers had rejected the 20 percent offer and are demanding a wage increase of 65 percent. They have vowed not to return to work until their demands are met in full.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s the price of copper fell on world markets and mining companies imposed a wage freeze on their workers. Commenting on the recent increase in copper prices, Albert Mando, NMAWU general secretary, said that miners looked at the high prices being returned to the producers and felt cheated.

Dow Jones Newswires reported that Luanshya mine is expecting its 2006 production to reach 67,000 metric tons compared with last year’s total of 50,000 tons.

Education workers in Algeria go on strike

A strike of Algerian teachers and school ancillary staff began on January 16. The action, which involves members of the various labour unions operating in the education sector, is in support of a demand for higher wages and improvements in working conditions

Union representatives have told the *North African Journal* that the turnout has been strong, with about 80 percent of all education workers responding to the call, despite a court order banning it.

According to the journal there was an almost 100 percent response in the eastern province of Bejaia. The union claims that 65 percent of staff joined the stoppage in Algiers, Algeria’s capital city.

The Ministry of Education challenges the union figures, claiming that there has only been a 21 percent turnout.



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